

Review of a Cinema Film from the Perspective of Symmetry: “The Pillow Book”

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Abstract

In this article, British director Peter Greenaway's 1996 film “The Pillow Book” will be reviewed from the perspective of symmetry. This essay includes general and technical information regarding the director and the selected film and in no way attempts to underline their importance for art theories and art history. Accompanied by a brief overview of the book on which it is based, the film has been assessed from a different perspective through the important concepts of basic sciences including symmetry, similarity and equivalence.

Symmetry

“If I am not mistaken the word symmetry is used in our everyday language in two meaning. In the one sense symmetric means something like well-proportioned, well-balanced, and symmetry denotes that sort of concordance of several parts by which they integrate into a whole. Beauty is bound up with symmetry.” [1] Or “An expression of equivalence between things” [2]

The quotes above present us with two fine examples of how the concept of symmetry could be defined in contemporary language and theory. By employing a more mathematical approach to the same concept, another definition may also be made, as “it is the inalterability of an object, a set or a system in the face of a transition” (Here, examples to transformations include; isometric transformations as a result of which symmetry is obtained (transformation, rotation, reflection, glide-reflection), scaling or shear transformations as a result of which similarity is obtained). This explanation also helps us see that a set is not necessarily always inalterable under a transformation and that in addition to symmetry, other concepts including equality, equivalence, similarity, proportion and balance may also be relevant. Here; while invoking mathematical expressions such as symmetry leaving its place to similarity in its transition from Euclidean geometry to non-Euclidean geometry or the ornamental and crystallographic symmetry, which are the two geometric symmetries with highly symmetrical characteristics; the above-mentioned expressions should not be taken as relevant solely in mathematical terms. Therefore, it is an important fact that symmetry plays as significant a role also in branches of science such as physics and chemistry as it does in mathematics. For these roles we deemed fit for symmetry, it should suffice to attempt to grasp Noether Theorem and how physical processes are governed by symmetry.

Does the concept of symmetry, on which we tried to draw in a few short sentences above, appear only in the world of science? Are we aware of the symmetry commanded by many elements in our living spaces? Or of the vase and the fresh carnations we placed in it? Of many objects we use? Of cities? Of the natural and social systems we live in?

Whether we realize this or not, symmetry confronts us in all fields of our lives, in our likes, in our perceptions of aesthetics, in our visualization habits and even everywhere else as a fixation. This essay interprets symmetry, which is a fundamental phenomenon in science, nature and art, along with accompanying concepts, without resorting to a rigid scientific explanation.

“The Pillow Book”

In the works of British director Peter Greenaway, whose film is to be examined here, the marks of the painting art and history, particularly of Renaissance painting, thought and painters are easily discernable. Having been treated with the logic of a collage or puzzle, it can be observed in his movies that every sequence was planned like a painting and scenes were constructed as if by an architect. What's more, his films, in which he features frame compositions that feature multiple images simultaneously, his intense imagery, his use of music/ painting/ graphic elements, poetic intensity of his images, intellectual demonstrations, may be deemed as a sort of adaptation of performance art into films.



Figure 1: Some scene from “*The Pillow Book*” by Peter Greenaway, 1996.

The artist's 1996 film, “The Pillow Book”, which is analyzed here, was based on literature and spiritual pleasures after setting out from the oriental calligraphy and culture. In the script of the film, Greenaway was inspired by the work “Makura No Soshi”, which is the first and most important example of the “zuihitsu” literary genre in Japanese literature, and is believed to have been written in the 10th century by a woman called Sei Shonagon. In light of the information provided by the Turkish translation of the book [3]; we learn that the text was written in the Heian period in Japanese history during which Heiankyo (today's Kyoto) was the capital; that the person who is believed to be the author was a lady-in-waiting of Emperor Ichijo's wife Empress Sadako Fujiwara and wrote diaries in which she talked about the nature, daily life, people, relationships and objects in the court where she lived for more than a decade. Therefore, with the exception of the chapters of the book directly used in the film (in the order used in the film; chapters 150, 028, 016, 057, 154, 167, 147, 172), it may be argued that the film was handled within the framework of the topics that set out from the cultural elements from the time and place narrated in the book to attempt to achieve universal feelings.

To give a brief synopsis of the film; the first three sequences of the film depict the highly important first three sentences of the script. The opening sequence which features the creation ceremony held in the fourth birthday of our heroine Nagaiko, followed by the second sequence during which her mother reads *The Pillow Book* by Nagaiko's bedside. The third sequence of the film is inserted inside the second sequence. Here, Nagaiko witnesses the business relations between her father and his publisher. After these scenes, the film depicts the story of Nagaiko, who is a modern Japanese woman, of writing her own thirteen volumes “*The Pillow Book*. ” She writes calligraphic texts and later stories on the bodies of her lovers. Among these, Jerome is a bisexual multilingual English interpreter who is also involved in a relationship with her father's publisher. During the course of their relationship, Jerome goes to a meeting to his lover, the publisher, as an alive manuscript to help Nagaiko work with the publisher. In a fake

suicide attempt to regain Nagaiko's diminishing interest in him, Jerome actually loses his life. After this dramatic turn of events, Nagaiko writes on Jerome's dead body the 6th Book of the series, "The Lover's Book." The publisher exhumes his beloved Jerome's body from the grave and publishes the text written on the body. Following this incident, Nagaiko sends 6 more books to the publisher. Nagaiko's last book would be the obituary of the publisher, which she writes on the body of a sumo wrestler. The film, which takes place between Kyoto and Hong Kong ends with the creation ceremony of Nagaiko's newborn baby. (The Agenda, The Book of the Innocent, The Book of the Idiot, The Book of Impotence, The Book of the Exhibitionist, The Book of the Lover, The Book of Youth, The Book of the Seducer, The Book of Secrets, The Book of Silence, The Book of the Betrayed, The Book of Births and Beginnings, The Book of the Dead.)

Although there is quite a bit to say both on Peter Greenaway's place in world cinema as a prominent figure and his film, which has made quite an echo in its time with its scenario and visuals, we should remain within the predefined boundaries of this article. Consequently, let us attempt to provide under brief headings an account of the conclusions we reached in our analysis of the film from the perspective explained above:

- a) Any attempt to approach a cinema film through symmetry or similar concepts, should first briefly address the function of the eye and camera. The digital version of the Cambridge Learner's Dictionary (2nd Edition) describes eye as "1 seeing (C) one of the two organs in your face, which you use to see with" and camera as "a piece of equipment used to take photographs or to make films/ a digital camera/ a television camera". The important piece of information about the descriptions provided here is the undertaking of the process of seeing or recording on various media via a mechanical or organic mechanism. While the eye conveys the images of what we look at, what see and what we think of to the relevant parts of our brain (where it is then recorded); the camera helps copy images on film. Here, when we view actions such as the creation, transfer and recording of the image as 'transformation', it will be possible to interpret each of the above-mentioned actions as a symmetry mechanism, and accordingly, a definition to be made on eye and camera as producers of symmetry would be consistent. In this case, film is described as a form of symmetrical projection or equivalent of the scenario taken up by the director; whereas what the audience sees through the eye may be deemed a symmetrical projection or equivalent of the film.
- b) "Bilateral Symmetry" will be easily detected as the most basic form of symmetry employed in the film, which was evidently created by a painter who commands a strong architectural perception. In almost every frame of the film, when we draw a line that divides the image equally, we obtain two divided images. Living and non-living things, architectural elements (also including interior architectural elements such as light and color) and objects in these two pieces of image that we obtained relative to each other seem to be symmetric or similar in terms of their position/ volume/ form/ composition.
- c) It is obvious that certain scenes in the film offer great resemblance to prominent Renaissance paintings. For instance, a composition similar to Lucas Cranach's "Adam and Eve" was created where the positions of the figures were preserved while the forbidden fruit was replaced by a library, therefore using calligraphy/literature.
- d) Bilateral symmetry may be seen also in the modification made by the director on standard screen sizes and the images he obtained by opening one or more windows on the main screen (this application is an adaptation to cinema of the visual effects employed in the video technique). The windows opened on the main screen are mostly in the shape of rectangle or square, and as is known, both are symmetrical as geometric shapes. Of the opened windows; single windows are mostly positioned symmetrically in the center and down-center of the main screen, double windows mostly in down-center, and quadruple windows mostly on the four corners of the main screen.

- e) Reflection is a frequently employed visual application throughout the film. The reflection process evidently includes symmetry in its essence. And the way it is used in the film preserves this quality.
- f) The scenario of the film presents a structure that includes a crystallographic symmetry. The scenario, which brings together Nagaiko (Vivian Wu), Nagaiko's father (Ken Ogata), her boyfriend Jerome (Ewan McGregor) and publisher (Yoshi Oida) as main characters, builds almost a pyramid with a square base. Nagaiko and the publisher are placed on the two opposing corners on a diagonal of the square base and the father and boyfriend on the two opposing corners of the other diagonal. The relationship among the main characters follow a mainly equivalent (on this matter, the use of expressions such as equivalent and similar have been deemed more appropriate) process. To give an example to such processes, the relationship Nagaiko's father and boyfriend establish with the publisher, the positions of Nagaiko's father and boyfriend in relation to Nagaiko or the relationship between Nagaiko and the publisher through the father and boyfriend.
- g) Many decorative elements employed in the film have been positioned as even numbers and in a symmetric fashion. Regarding the matter, many examples may be cited, including the bamboo decoration situated by the entrance of Nagaiko's house, a pair of wine glasses placed on the bar counter at the café or a couple of decorative white fish tails in the bedroom of the house Nagaiko shares with her husband.



Figure 2: Some scenes from 'The Pillow Book' by Peter Greenaway, 1996.

Conclusion

Peter Greenaway's production "The Pillow Book", which has been reviewed in general terms through concepts such as symmetry and similarity, is a film that earned popular acclaim. Particularly the color and the scenes of the movie, the latter being constructed with the sensitivity of a Renaissance artist in full command of symmetry/balance, are the most outstanding elements that influence the audience. Based on this, an elaboration on the reasons why a film makes an impact on the audience would reveal that the aesthetic values of the film come at the top. Here, the concept of aesthetics is associated with symmetry due to its inherent values of proportion and balance—a process that once again brings up the question of what kind of a relationship exists between beauty, aesthetics and symmetry.

References

- [1] H. Weyl, *Symmetry*, Princeton University Press, pp.3. 1952.
- [2] L.M. Lederman, C.T. Hill, *Simetri ve Evrenin Görkemli Güzelliğini Anlamak*, Güncel Yayıncılık, pp.13. 2005.
- [3] S. Şonagon, *Yastıkname*, Metis Yayıncılık, pp. 9-27. 2006.